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ABSTRACT

The number of American Indians enrolled in institutions of higher education is very small. Enrollment figures for fall 1984 show Indians made up .68% of the total enrollment in institutions of higher education in the country, but only 15% of them were in universities. Their largest representation was in two-year institutions, where 54% of Indian students were enrolled. This is probably due to the existence of 25 Indian run community colleges. Preliminary data from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) 1986 enrollment survey show Indians comprise .4% of graduate students in CGS institutions. The historical experience of American Indians with education provides a background for such underrepresentation in higher education, especially graduate education. Indian people in the past have had education used as a means of forcible acculturation to American society. Though many Indian parents value education for their children, expectations of the results are often vague because they themselves have limited educational experiences. A barrier to Indian access to higher education is the family income level. The federal government has played the major role in providing education for American Indians, and the Indian Education Act of 1972 laid the basis for greater involvement of Indian parents in the education of their children and greater access for Indian students to graduate education. The fact that few Indian students choose to enter graduate programs is due to many deep-seated cultural and historical factors as well as the socioeconomic status of many Indian families. Changes such as more financial opportunities and cooperation with tribal governments to respond to the needs for educational programs should be effected. (SM)

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Clara Sue Kidwell, SGS Dean in Residence

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American Indians in Graduate Education

Clara Sue Kidwell, CGS Dean in Residence

American Indians have participated in higher education virtually from its inception in America. Harvard College had a special Indian College, although a probably apocryphal story has it that of the first eight Indian students there, three went home and five died. Dartmouth College evolved from Moore's Charity School for Indians, although not long after its founding it was serving mainly the sons of the landed gentry of the Connecticut River Valley, rather than the "sons of the forest."

If Indians have gone to college since colonial times, it is also true that education was a tool of European policies to Christianize and civilize them and thus to quell their forcible opposition to encroachments on their land. However, Indians did not always take kindly to European education. To paraphrase the comment of one Indian leader to Benjamin Franklin, when Indians went away to college, they were virtually worthless to their tribes when they returned. They could not hunt, and they did not know the woods. The leader suggested that the Europeans send their young men to live with the Indians, who would make real men of them.

The number of Indians in colonial colleges was minute. And it remains very small to this day. Enrollment figures for fall of 1984 show that Indians made up .68% of the total enrollment in institutions of higher education in the country, but only 15% of those students were in universities. Their largest representation was in two-year institutions, where 54% of Indian students were enrolled.[1] Preliminary data from the 1986 CGS enrollment survey show that Indians comprise .4% (3,169) of graduate students in CGS member institutions.

The historical experience of American Indians with education provides the background for the underrepresentation of American Indians in higher education, and particularly in graduate education. The concern about the usefulness to their communities of young people who go away to college is still voiced. Indian people accept the idea that education is important, but they sometimes fear it as a potential threat to their identities as much as they acknowledge its potential benefit to their communities. Indian people in the past have been subjected to education as a means of forcible acculturation to American society. Students had their hair cut, their traditional dress replaced with school uniforms, and they were punished for speaking their native languages. Education was not a means of upward mobility but often a cause of loss of tribal identity.

Although many Indian parents value education for their children, their expectations of the results of education are often vague because they themselves have limited educational experiences. This is certainly true for graduate education. For instance, according to the 1980 census, only 5.2% of Indian people in the 40–69 range had completed 17 years of school, while 14.2% of the white population had completed that much. Thus, as a percentage of their respective populations, Indians who were in the age range to be parents of college age children in 1980 were much less likely to have had any graduate education themselves and thus to be able to tell their children what graduate education might demand or what opportunities it might present.

A barrier to Indian access to higher education is the income level of families. The costs of college education continue to increase, and have done so at rates higher than the inflation rate of the American economy. However, in 1980, census data showed that the median income of Indian families was $13,724, while that of white families was $20,835. This difference indicates how difficult it would be for an average Indian family to afford the costs of college education. Although the Bureau of Indian Affairs and many tribes provide limited financial support for college costs, the price of a college degree is still intimidating, especially if it involves debt burden.

The federal government has played the major role in providing education for American Indians. Treaties between Indian tribes and the government often provided for school buildings and teachers to instruct Indians in agricultural and mechanical arts. At least one tribe, however, the Choctaws, negotiated a provision in their treaty of 1830 setting up a scholarship fund for the education of twenty youths a year in a school in Kentucky. The Bureau of Indian Affairs established vocational boarding schools for Indian students in the 1880s, and those schools provided the only real access to "higher" education, i.e., post high school, for many Indians until the 1950s, when government policy called for relocation of Indians from reservations to urban areas and provided allowances for job training programs, primarily vocational.

The Indian Education Act of 1972 (P.L. 92-318) laid the basis for greater involvement of Indian parents in the education of their children and greater access for Indian students to graduate education. The Indian Fellowship Program administered by the Indian Education Office in the U.S. Office of Education has provided funding for Indian students, but in only a limited number of professional degree programs—law, business administration, education, medicine, engineering, natural resource management, and psychology and related fields. The program has provided access for students in areas where there is a perceived need in Indian communities for trained professionals. A special program has also operated to support selected institutions which established programs for Indian students leading to Ed.D.s in educational administration.

The existence of special programs, and fellowship support, probably accounts for the fact that the largest number of doctoral degrees awarded to American Indians has been in education. In 1986, of the 99 doctorates awarded to American Indians, 26 were in some area of education.[2] Interestingly, the next largest number was 23 in life sciences, which included six in health-related fields. These figures may result from special funding programs for graduate work administered by the Indian Health Service.

If Indian people receive few doctoral degrees, they are even more underrepresented on college faculties. The Digest of Educational Statistics showed only 1,307 Indians (.27%) on the faculties of institutions of higher education in the fall of 1983.[3]

American Indians are underrepresented in graduate schools at public and private institutions throughout the country in part because of the historical factors mentioned above, and in part

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because Indian communities have placed a value on having control of their own schools to meet their own needs. The large proportion of American Indian college students in two-year institutions is certainly due at least partly to the existence of twenty-five Indian-controlled community colleges, twenty-two of which are located on Indian reservations. The colleges, which comprise the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, are strongly oriented toward the immediate needs of job training for people living on the reservation, but the associate of arts degree programs generally provide transferable academic coursework.

American Indians in 1980 constituted approximately .8% of the population of the United States. There are over 500 federally recognized Indian tribal groups. American Indians are still largely rural in their living patterns, although somewhat over 50% lived in metropolitan areas, according to the 1980 census. Indian populations are heavily concentrated in Oklahoma and in the western one-third of the country, with California having the largest absolute number of Indian residents.

Although virtually all Indian tribes have shared the historical experience of conflict with the United States and loss of tribal lands, their traditional cultures varied widely, and it is difficult to talk about a shared sense of Indian identity in the face of the different languages and customs that have in the past and, in many communities, still exist today. Cultural and community values often mitigate against students' leaving their homes to spend long times away at school. Even for Indian people living in urban enclaves, socio-economic factors and parental educational levels make it difficult for students to receive the financial support and encouragement from their parents that would make college a possibility. It is possible to see why people from Indian communities do not put the same value on higher education, and particularly graduate education, as do people who view education as a means of access to the economic benefits of American society.

The fact that few Indian students choose to enter graduate programs is due to many deep-seated cultural and historical factors, as well as the socio-economic status of many Indian families. However, there are some changes that can be effected. One is an increase in financial opportunities, including a broadening of the fields supported by the Indian Fellowship program. Universities should try to work with tribal governments to find ways they can be responsive to needs for educational programs. They should also work with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium institutions to identify and encourage promising students. They should pay special attention to the few American Indian undergraduates they may have.

We cannot change the results of history overnight, but we need to enhance existing efforts and begin new ones sensitive to the cultures and values of American Indian communities.

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[1]According to the National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1988* (Washington, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1988), the enrollment of American Indians in higher education in 1984 was 83,571. Of those, 72,142 were in public institutions and 11,429 were in private institutions. Of the total, 69,379 were undergraduates, 3,689 were graduate students, and 988 were in first professional degree programs (law, medicine and other health careers, and theology), and 9,515 were unclassified.

[2]*Summary Report 1986: Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987), p. 47.

[3]*Digest of Educational Statistics*, p. 177.

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